

*Recherche littéraire/Literary Research*

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## ***Recherche littéraire / Literary Research***

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**Inquiries and submissions:**

Marc Maufort, Rédacteur/Editor, *RL/LR*

Email: [mmaufort@ulb.ac.be](mailto:mmaufort@ulb.ac.be)

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Email: [mmaufort@ulb.ac.be](mailto:mmaufort@ulb.ac.be)

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# Intermediality and Literary History

MASSIMO FUSILLO

*massimo.fusillo@gmail.com*

*University of L'Aquila, Italy*

In contemporary culture, the general attitude towards literature appears extremely ambivalent, in an almost paradoxical way. On the one hand, literature and the humanities at large have definitively lost any hegemonic position in our educational system and social life, and they suffer from a quite drastic marginality, if not isolation. On the other hand, crucial literary concepts – such as narration, rhetoric, or empathy – play an increasingly significant role in various sciences, from philosophy to psychoanalysis, from neurobiology to legal or social sciences, from anthropology to historiography, including the new media. We are certainly witnessing a massive dissemination of literary techniques that redefine literature no longer as a circumscribed field, but as an omnipervasive and fluid phenomenon.

There are two different ways of facing this paradoxical ambivalence: either through a traditional and “apocalyptic” approach, or through a more dynamic and “constructive” one. While many intellectuals continue to complain about the decline of the humanities and to defend the irreplaceable purity of literature (often implying its intrinsic superiority to other artistic languages), intensive studies on translation, adaptation and intermediality strive to reconfigure the role of literature in contemporary polymorphous imaginary by focusing on hybridizations. Although I remain persuaded that literature does possess some specific expressive force, I am inclined to pursue the second trend. I am deeply convinced that the future of comparative literature lies in such methodological approach that traces the fragmentary dissemination of literature in every artistic language and cultural setting.

In the last decades, visual studies have challenged comparative literature in multifarious ways, far beyond the canonical comparison between

literature and painting. Two crucial theoretical presuppositions organize visual studies as an open and complex field of research characterized by an interdisciplinary dialogue: first, the cultural nature of the image; second, a constant interaction between word and image that involves memory, perception and emotional life (Mitchell).

Recalling Roland Barthes' theory of *écriture*, this fluid vision of textuality has become more radical after the digital revolution, which transformed and is still transforming the classical notions of author, text, public, and intellectual property. Studies on intermediality are facing the continuous hybridization that emerges out of this process, the multisensory environment in which we constantly live: namely the "convergence culture," as defined by Henry Jenkins. It is a perspective that must certainly affect comparative literature, since the literary text is gradually becoming a part of a complex galaxy of media and languages. This calls for a multidirectional method of comparison very close to the "diffractive reading" proposed by Donna Haraway in 1997, which aims at disrupting any linear temporality and fixed causality, and at transcending disciplinary boundaries. Similar suggestions have been made by scholars developing the theory of contemporary visual art, a field characterized by radical experimentation. I am thinking especially of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Radicant* (2009): Bourriaud uses the botanical term "radicant," which denotes a process of root producing in an unusual part of the plant (e.g. ivy), as a metaphor to propose a model of art for the contemporary age based on simultaneous enrooting and on incessant transcoding and translating images, ideas, and behaviours.

The Research Committee on Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages (CHLEL) has already published a very valuable book on this subject: *New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression* (2014). Edited by Marcel Cornis-Pope it deals with the drastic contemporary transformations of key notions, such as literacy, text, and creativity. The digital revolution, which gave birth to so-called digimodernism, also produced new forms of writing and reading, thereby expanding the notion of text in a multimedia and hybrid direction, and breaking down the boundaries between arts through massive cross-pollination. While space constraints prevent me from discussing here thorny questions such as the transition from postmodernism to digimodernism, or the tension between the global and the local in cyberliteracy, I mostly agree with these reflections and with the idea that comparative literature should deal

not only with textual literacy, but also with visual, electronic, gestural, performative and even social literacies.

I would like to develop and broaden this position by means of a two-fold proposal. First, I prefer to use the concept of intermediality; second, I will extend this perspective to a historical level, imagining an intermedial comparative history of literature in specific ages and movements, for example the baroque.

First defined in 1966 by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, the concept of intermediality labels any kind of synergy between different artistic languages: it is no mere juxtaposition, as in the case of multimedia, but a potential fusion, a profound interaction. Fluxus was an avant-garde group, which worked on happenings and performance: the poetics of intermediality was conceived in reaction against the purism of modernist research (in particular, the theory of abstract art and separation of languages sustained by Clement Greenberg and inspired by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon*). At the same time, this poetics introduced a new aesthetic and cultural pattern based on fluidity and on less rigid categorizations. The term "Intermedia" was borrowed from Romantic poet Samuel Coleridge, but the concept recuperates the utopia of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. First conceived by Wagner as a way to retrieve the synthesis of arts at the core of Greek tragedy, the total work of art played a significant role, first in Symbolism and Aestheticism (the poetics of synesthesia), and then in the various avant-gardes and their utopian subversions. The main goal was regenerating the public function of the artistic creation, which is strongly opposed to mass culture and technology, but which depends on them at the same time. This an ambivalent relationship, is noticeable in the various realizations of the total work of art in the twentieth century (Eisenstein, Brecht, Riefensthal, Stravinskij, Artaud, Disney, Warhol, and even the delirious aestheticization of Nazism as well as Stalin's propaganda). In today's era characterized by the end of utopias and avant-gardes, and by fragmentations and disseminations, the total work of art can be read as "a specific variation of intermediality, a practice that subverts any essentialist vision of artistic languages," aiming at "a complex [...] blending of perceptions, amplified by new media and by the syncretic nature of the cyberspace" (Fusillo and Grishakova blurb; also see Smith; Finger and Follett; Imhoof, Menninger and Steinhoff).

On the one hand, intermediality is deeply rooted in this historical and aesthetic context; on the other hand, it has quickly become an abstract and synchronic category, which includes any kind of synergy between



media in any given timeframe and culture. Among the huge scholarship examining this category, Irina Rajewsky's theory of a ternary pattern brilliantly enlightens its wide range of applications. She distinguishes between: 1) medial transposition, which describes a medial product transformed into another medium, as in cinematic adaptations or novelizations; 2) medial combination, which gives birth to new media products, such as the iconotext (e.g. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, a novel interwoven with photos made by the same author), or opera and cinema, synthetic arts in their intrinsic structure; and finally 3) intermedial reference, which designates a medium describing or evoking another medium, as in the case of ekphrasis, a literary description of visual (or musical or cinematic) works of art; cinematic cut scenes in videogames; or musical strategies in narrative and poetry (Rajewsky "Intermediality" 51–52).

What would an intermedial comparative history of literature look like? We all know that to make (literary) history always implies a clear positioning and strongly depends on cultural and social contexts. All history is contemporary history, as Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce aptly put it (1938). The various CHLEL projects vividly exemplify this idea, if one thinks of the various similar choices of topics displayed by contemporary theories and attitudes, such as the absence of strong teleological and organic patterns, the preference for figures and motifs, the highlighting of margins and details. Since intermediality defines today's era, as Cornis Pope's collection clearly shows, and since it is also a trans-cultural category which can describe different experiences, I argue that an intermedial comparative approach could shed new light on the practice of literary historiography, from various points of view. The concept of medium is certainly not a simple synonym for text or art: it is a social institution, a communicative practice. This is the reason why the mediology advocated by Marshall McLuhan's pioneering studies has often been applied to pre-modern contexts, from Homer to the Renaissance.

With the label "comparative intermedial history" I do not simply refer to a literary history which gives enough space to other arts; it must highlight, as its first programmatic point, the synergy between arts and the rewriting into different codes through an anti-hierarchical approach. Adaptations must be considered not as a cultivated curiosity, or as a marginal proof of how an author or a text can be successful; but as a significant part of textual metamorphosis, which can have retroactive effects on the reading of the original. In order to show how this approach cannot be confined to the contemporary digital world, I will briefly focus on

one significant example. More than any other time in modern European history, the period that roughly coincides with the seventeenth century and falls under the definition of “the Baroque” was crucial in shaping the modern idea of “mediascape” and in constructing the system of interrelations between the arts that is still active today (Lyons). Nevertheless, the very notion of “mediascape,” together with the hermeneutical tools provided by intermedial studies, has seldom been applied to the study of the Baroque, although the similarity between the baroque age and ours has been stressed many times, which led to the creation of a new category, the neo-Baroque. An intermedial comparative literary history of the Baroque should focus especially on 1) visuality, including the ekphrasis as a genre, pictorial effects so beloved by poets and narrators, common themes in painting and literature (e.g. metamorphosis, the double), and other rhetorical strategies; 2) music, including the opera as a mixed genre, but also other forms of exchanges; and 3) on performance, since the baroque shows a predilection for feasts, ephemeral happenings, and new theatrical practices sometimes linked to specific literary genres, such as tragicomedy.

Tragicomedy is perhaps the genre that most condenses the experimental anxiety of Baroque literature and its search for new expressive strategies. Along with its increasing success, tragicomedy at the same time triggered intense controversy, especially in countries most indebted to the classical tradition. The Aristotelian system of literary genres was based on a clear (stylistic and ideological) distinction between tragedy and comedy: Horace’s *Poetics* (vv. 91–92) recognized only comedies displaying a slightly serious tone, while Cicero (*De optimo genere oratorum* 1, 1) radically opposed any contamination between the two genres. A century later, at the beginning of mature modernity, the questioning of a rigid binarism between tragedy and comedy is at the core of the two new literary forms that will characterize late modern history, drama and the novel: both focused on a new stylistic category beyond the tragic and the comic, i.e. the serious. A profound cross-fertilization between the tragic and the comic underlies the Romantic revolution, and it is no coincidence that the category of tragicomedy re-emerges in the twentieth century in an extreme, radical and tragic writer, Samuel Beckett. Through this term Beckett defined his masterpiece, *Waiting for Godot*, indicating a grotesque, metaphysical void beyond categories. Tragicomedy therefore shows the Baroque synergy between literature, theatre, and general aesthetics, as well as its diffraction in modern and contemporary artistic

praxis, ranging up to the radical mixture of styles in the neo-baroque visual art, which is full of grotesque contaminations (Peter Greenaway; Jake and Dinos Chapman).

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